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HOT SPRINGS

Past and Present

Sally Royce Weir

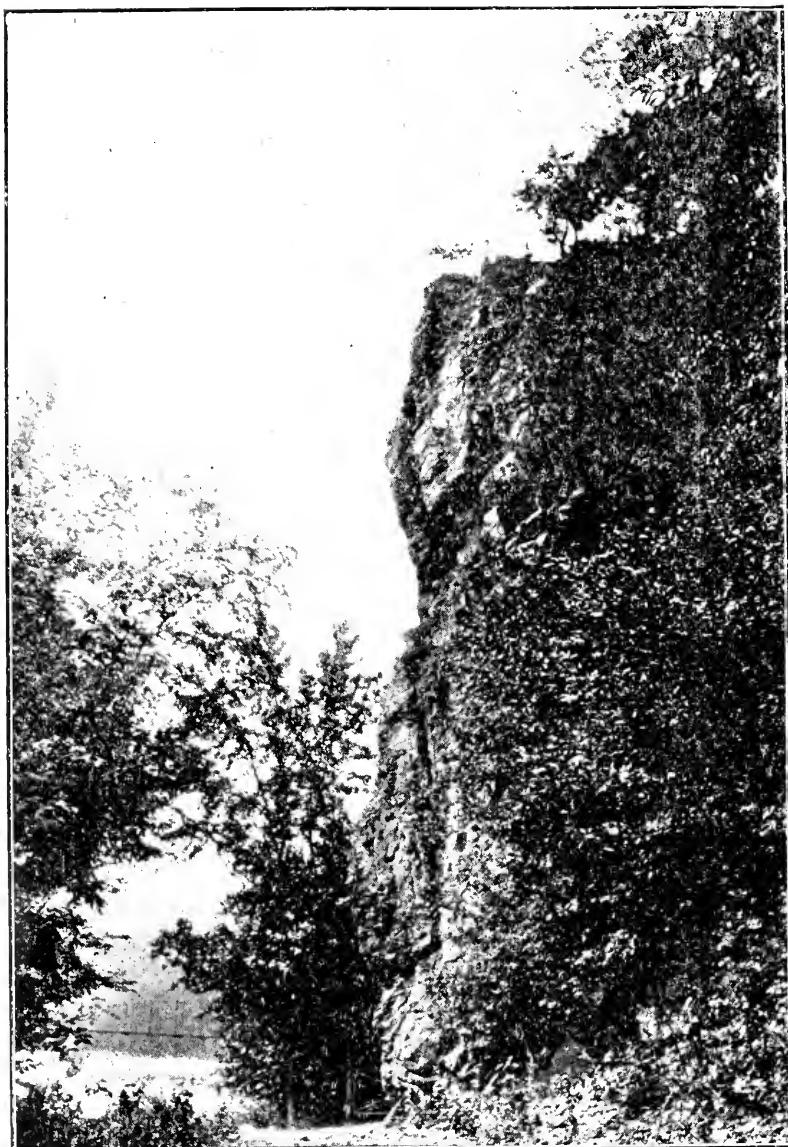


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LOVER'S LEAP

HOT SPRINGS, PAST AND PRESENT.

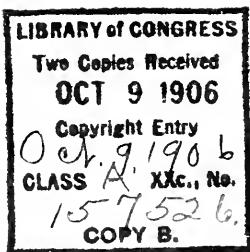
BY . . .

SALLY ROYCE WEIR

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HOT SPRINGS, PAST AND PRESENT.

BY SALLY ROYCE WEIR.

AS a green island lies like a gem on the bosom of the ocean, so the lovely valley of Hot Springs lies in the heart of the Alleghany Mountains. The particular range in which it is situated is called the "Great Smoky Mountains," and is appropriately named. A soft blue haze like smoke pervades the air at all times, even after a heavy rain, and a perfectly clear day is rare. Soon after leaving Asheville the mountains close in to the narrow gorge through which the French Broad river runs, with only room for the railroad track, and in many places that has been cut out of the solid rock.

The river is rough and rapid, and the scenery only to be compared to that of some of the beautiful western states. Little groups of canoes tied to the bank show where the infrequent crossings are, and steep trails leading up

the mountains indicate some remote settlement in the distance. Not far from Hot Springs, Mountain Island stands boldly in mid-stream; and the turbulent river, after dashing itself madly against its rocky face, is divided into two currents, to meet again below it after passing over a picturesque fall. At that place the train passes through the Rock Cut, a dangerous place on the road for any track walker, and already marked by one tragedy. A tramp mother and her five forlorn little children were overtaken by a passenger train at this spot, and the mother was killed while trying to rescue one of her younger children. A few seconds after passing this spot, the train swings around a curve, and dashes on to the bridge at Deep Water. Here the river is so narrow that one would think an active boy could jump across it, but the water is forty feet deep or more, and in a wreck at this point some years ago the engine and tender were completely buried out of sight, except one small corner of the tender which could still be seen above the water. Just below the bridge the river is very broad and it is here that the valley of Hot Springs is first seen. It makes a beautiful picture from this point. The mountains fall away for a brief space, and the train leaving the river runs

through the heart of the valley, which is so small that the glance of an eye can take in its extent. In that small space a little village has grown up containing some handsome dwelling houses, a bank, five churches, a number of stores, an industrial school and a large hotel. Near the hotel are the various springs miscalled "hot," with a temperature of from ninety-six to one hundred and four degrees. These, and the Virginia Springs, are the only warm springs east of the Mississippi.

As may be supposed, the Indians were the first to discover their medicinal properties, and there is evidence that they were much esteemed and sought by them, not only by those who owned them by right of possession, but by other tribes as well. The Cherokees were masters of the western part of the state, and there is still a large reservation of them about forty miles from the Springs. Evidence is not wanting that Indians came here, even from the Great Lakes, for Lake Superior copper has been found here, which it is supposed they brought for buying peace while bathing in the Springs. But few traditions of the Indians have been preserved in connection with this place, but the following is one which seems to combine the necessary elements of romance and sadness.

Not far from the Springs and the hotel, stands a very high precipitous rock overlooking the river. It can be ascended by a narrow crumbling path through rhododendron bushes, and from its summit a fine view may be obtained of the valley. This rock is only part of a very high mountain which rises directly back of it, and is called Lover's Leap, a very common name: hundreds of guests have found their way to the top, but I think few have heard its story. Lone Wolf was a mighty chief of the Cherokees, who ruled the steaming pools beside the Taskeeoskie. He had three tall sons, braves of renown, but only one daughter, a beautiful maiden in her sixteenth summer; Mist-on-the-Mountain she was called, and many braves sought her love, and the favor of the old chief. Mist-on-the-Mountain loved none of them, but her father desired her to marry Tall Pine, a wily, powerful brave, much older than the maiden, but who threatened to become a rival in power to Lone Wolf, who therefore desired to bind him to his interest. About this time there came one evening a party consisting of an old chief and his young men. They came as friends, they said, to visit a warrior so renowned as Lone Wolf, and to try the virtues of the steaming pools by the Taskeeoskie river.

They were from a very far country; three moons had they journeyed; also they brought presents for Lone Wolf and his young men, curious belts of wampum, rich dark furs of the beaver, and bits of copper ore from beside the Great Lakes. They were made welcome, one moon they stayed, and the young men of the two chiefs hunted together. But Magwa, one of the strangers, a tall handsome young brave, saw something dearer to him than the hunt: he loved the beautiful Mist-on-the-Mountain, and she in return loved him: but when on the eve of his departure he asked her father for her, he was sternly refused and told that she was promised. Seeming to acquiesce, he left with his party, but at the end of the first day's journey he was missed, and they continued on their way without him. The second night after they left, a lovely, bright June night when the full moon was rising over Round Top, Mist-on-the-Mountain left the camp, and stealthily made her way to the foot of this towering rock, that still lay in the shadow of the mountain, though the valley was bright in the moonlight. She waited listening, but there was no sound except those common to the night, the hunting call of a wolf on Round Top, and the answer of its mates as they started out in search of food,

and high on the mountain above her the wailing cry of a lost child, which she knew was the voice of the tawny panther. All these she feared not, her ear was attentive to another sound she wished to hear. But unfortunately she could not see near her, crouched in the darkness of the bushes and intently watching her, something more cruel than wolf or panther. At last a slight sound, the dip of a paddle, and a canoe of birch bark has touched the bank. She starts forward to meet it, the figure in the canoe stoops to tie it to the bank; but the other watcher, the rival brave, who has followed Mist-on-the-Mountain to her tryst, unseen by both the lovers has reached the bank first, and as Magwa rises he strikes him a sure blow, that crashes through his skull, and he sinks back lifeless in the canoe. Mist-on-the-Mountain stands for a moment frozen with horror, but as the murderer approaches her, she turns to flee; but where? He is between her and the camp, she can not pass him, nor can she ever return there after this night. In a moment she is flying up the steep and crumbling path that leads to the top of the rock, he close behind her, but her light foot is more fleet than his, she has gained the top and swiftly passes over the narrow path to the broader stone at the edge

of the rock; she hears his step behind her, but now she fears him not. One moment she stands, and takes a last look at the valley, clearly seen in the bright light of the moon, although the rock is still in shadow. She sees the light of her father's wigwam, her home no more, and the dark close forest of green which covers the valley; the mountains stand out clear against the sky, and at her feet the Taskeeoskie, Racing Water, which swollen by the rain of previous days is rising into full tide, and now dashes against the foot of the rock. This night they were to have started down it on their long journey to the distant land, and now he has gone alone, on a longer journey, and with empty hands; no food has he, nor bow and arrows with which to hunt, and faint and hungry will he be when he reaches the land of spirits. Far down the river a gleam of white catches her eye; the birch bark canoe which he had prepared with loving care to bear his bride away to her home, has become loosed with the rising water, and has floated out on the tide with its still burden. His spirit calls her to keep her promise; her resolve is taken that he shall not travel alone. The step is close behind now, a hand is stretched out to grasp her, but with a glad call to her lover, she has sprung far out from the extreme

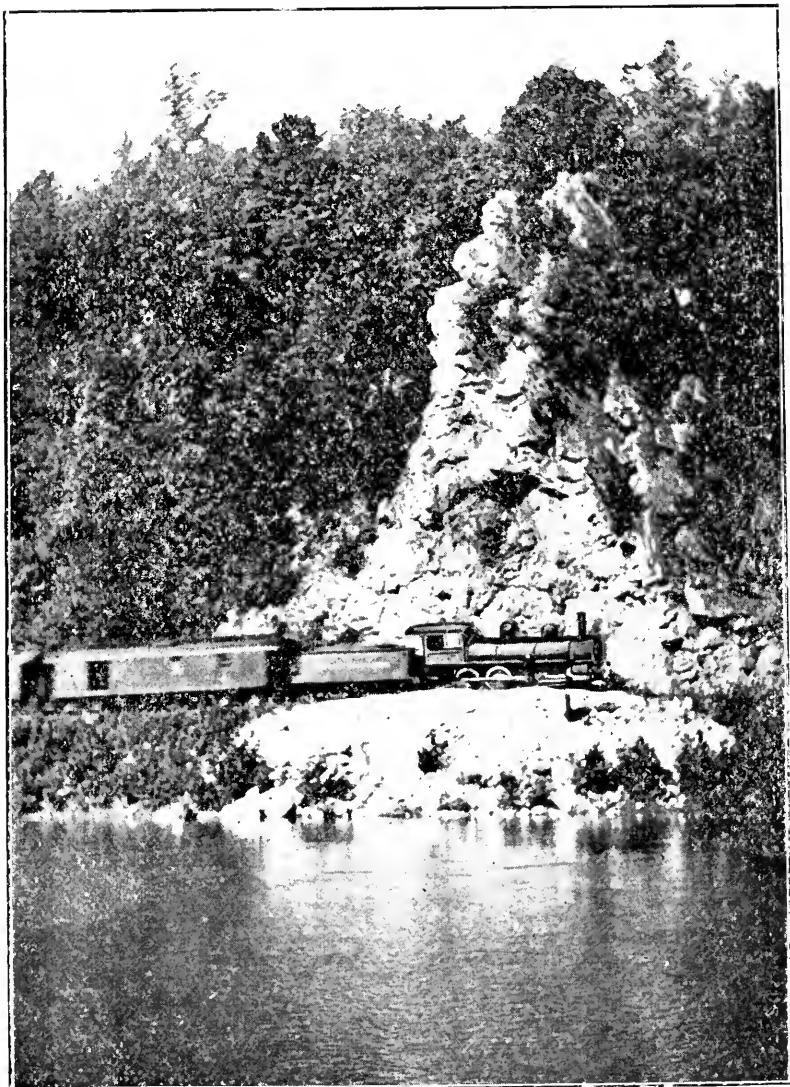
point of the rock on which she stands. A dull sound is heard, the ripples widen out, but the increasing rush of the water blots them quickly from sight, and the two lovers have indeed started on their journey together. But what of Tall Pine, her pursuer? He stands like one stunned, cold fear at his heart, his bones frozen with that vision of sudden death, his limbs shaking, he turns in mad haste to leave the accursed rock whence dead hands seem trying to push him down; over the narrow path he stumbles and down the crumbling slippery way, through close bushes of evergreen. Once a great hunter, his cunning is all gone now, and he sees not that tawny form crouched close on the overhanging limb above him, nor those eyes of fire that watch his every movement. One moment more and he is under the limb; there is a spring, a snarling cry, and the heavy body strikes him on the shoulders; cruel teeth and claws sink deep in his flesh, and with a dreadful cry beast and man roll down the dark slope. The full moon rises higher over Round Top, the rock is at last bathed in its light, and all is quiet, except the lap of the water against the rock, a snarling sound, and the crunching of bones in the dark rhododendrons.

Years have passed since that night, the

Indians are gone, the white men have taken their place, the legend is almost forgotten, but who can say that the unseen spirits of those lovers do not still haunt that grim rock, the scene of their love and death, watching with jealous eyes the careless crowds that come and go. Only under a certain conjunction of circumstances, say the wise, will they again be visible to mortal eye. If when the June moon rises full over Round Top the river is again in flood, lapping the base of the rock, then let the unwary night traveler beware. So at least think Sam Hootenpile, Jim Carver and Buck Forehand, three friendly moonshiners who made a rendezvous at the rock on such a night, June 7, 1875, bringing jugs of the clear mountain dew to exchange for meal to be "packed," on their backs over the steep mountain trail, to the hidden still in the deep ravine. They were taking a little more than their accustomed stimulant as they waited, when suddenly as the full moon began to rise there were enacted before their astonished and superstitious eyes the events of that other night so long ago. Again they heard the hunting call of the gray wolf and the wailing cry of the panther, strange sounds in this present day: saw again the birch bark canoe and witnessed the death of Magwa.

the wild flight and tragic leap of Mist-on-the-Mountain, and heard the dreadful death cry of Tall Pine. In panic they fled, each man for himself, leaving their jugs behind them, never again to rendezvous in that particular spot. But it was on a bright June day, and not under the ghostly moon, that an old man, a stranger, boarding in the village, started alone to visit Lover's Leap and climb the mountain back of it. As he did not return, search was made and he was found lying dead at the base of some of the rocks on his upward climb. No mark of the deadly rattlers which inhabit these cliffs was found on his person, not any sign of violence, and the usual verdict in such cases was found, "heart failure;" but can any one truly say they understand the mystery or the possible cause of such a death in such a spot?

With the coming of the white man, the Indian trail by the river became in time the stage route and the great stock road, and there being no railroads through this section, the traffic over it was very great, stage stands and night stands for stock springing up along the road. Those were great days, and the stage the most important part; the big red Concord stage with boot behind, and rack on top, loaded with passengers, and drawn by four horses; the



"OUT OF THE SOLID ROCK"

toot of its horn as a stand was approached, the important driver, the crack of his whip, and his imperious call, "Make way for the United States Mail!" Lastly the fears of timorous country women, that the stage, if they met it, would make their horses run away; the small fears of those who lived before the automobile awoke to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This road was known as the great Kentucky stock road, and thousands of hogs, mules and cattle were driven over it every fall from Kentucky, through to Charleston, Hamburg, Augusta and other Southern points. Many other travelers there were, some going south in their own carriages with their colored servants attending, on their way to visit relatives. Such travelers would cry out in despair, "Oh, we shall never make the day's journey!" as some turn in the ever winding road would show, as far as the eye could reach, an unbroken line of hogs, great fat fellows which could hardly travel on their footsore, tender feet, but had not yet covered half of the long journey to their destination. Lagging behind were the very large ones, which really could not go any further, and were being gently urged on to the next stopping place, where they would be traded off for the night's expense. The hogs

would surround the carriage, when it reached the main drove, root up the wheels and crowd under the horses making them frantic, and it was with difficult and slow driving that they were passed at last, when probably the next turn would reveal another and still larger drove ahead. Many were the traps made on the road to steal some of the hogs. One that was very ingenious was a trap with a pivot door, on the floor of a bridge, with a pen, or box underneath, and as the hogs stepped on to it, it would turn, and drop them into the box below, one or two never being missed from that closely moving mass.

The danger of traveling this road was very great, for there were no banks, any more than there were railroads, and of course no checks or drafts. Each man carried his money on his own person, and took his own risk. First, the merchants went south in the spring to Charleston and other cities to buy goods, and in the fall the drovers returned after selling their stock, with their hard earned money. It was in gold and silver, and also in notes, and was often carried in a belt around the waist, concealed by the clothing.

Many were robbed, some both robbed and murdered on this dangerous road, where the

bushes grew so close to its side that a man had only to step into their shelter to be free from all pursuit, and the rough, turbulent French Broad bounded the other side. One traveler, a stock man, relates a thrilling experience as follows: I had been south with a large bunch of stock, and had sold them at considerable profit. My partner was detained on business of his own, so I was traveling home alone. As I was carrying quite a sum of money in my belt, I decided to take as few risks as possible, and so time my day's journey, when I reached the French Broad river, that I could stop over night at good places, well known to me. But as ill luck would have it, when I reached that part of my road my horse cast a shoe and became lame, the way being rough, so that when night came I was still some distance from my tavern, and was compelled to stop at the first house I came to. I was not well pleased with its appearance and still less so when I went inside, but my horse had been taken to the barn, so I thought I would make the best of a bad job. I saw three or four men about, and some women who were cooking the supper. The house was a double log cabin with an open entry way between, and a rickety stair leading from it to two rooms above. After a fairly good supper of

fried chicken, coffee and corn pone, I asked for my room. I felt tired, and to tell the truth I did not fancy the society of my hosts, but I had still to wait awhile, as the woman said my room was not ready yet.

Presently the man appeared with a candle and asked me to follow. He preceded me up the rickety stairs and into the right hand room, gave a quick glance around, set the candle on the table, bade me a surly good night, and I heard him softly turn the key in the lock, and depart down the stairs. I was alone, but still I felt there was some one, or something else in the room besides myself. I looked all around. It was a small room, and only contained the bed, a table and two chairs. The bed was the old-fashioned sort with small upright posts, and a curtain or flounce all around the bottom. I began to prepare for bed, and took off my coat, but my eyes were always traveling back towards the bed. I went up and looked at it but it seemed all right; then I looked down, and there near my feet I saw something dark on the floor. I touched it with my finger, it was wet. I brought the candle for a closer look. The wet spot was blood! Merciful heavens! Holding the candle in my shaking hand I knelt down by the bed, and raised the flounce. There, as I ex-

pected, lay a dead man, still warm and bleeding, his throat cut from ear to ear. No wonder my room was not ready yet! Visitors had come too fast that night, and they had killed him to make ready for me, but could not remove him because the stairs came down in sight of the room in which I was sitting.

Now, what must I do, stay there to be butchered like a sheep? Not if I could help it. I realized I would be no match for the three or four men I had seen about the place; the one window in the room was small, a mere peep hole, and was nailed down besides; the door was locked, sure proof of murderous intentions, and I knew they were listening to hear whether I had discovered anything, so I moved carefully. At last I thought out a plan. I turned down the covers of the bed clear to the foot, and with tremendous exertion, and the greatest care, lifted out the poor unfortunate and placed him in the bed, laying him on his side with his face to the wall, and covering him up well. I then replaced the bed flounce, blew out the candle, and waited behind the door, with my shoes in my hand. The window had no curtain, and the night being clear, the stars gave a glimmering light in the room. I can never tell how long I waited, several years I think, when I heard a

slight sound on the stairs, then still more plainly some one turning the key in the lock. The door was pushed gently open, and I could count one, two, three, four pass in softly on tiptoe creeping to the bed, and as softly I crept through the open door hearing, even as I went, the blow that was intended to end my life. I reached the ground without being discovered and was soon hidden in the bushes, from there making my way to a place of safety.

When I reached a respectable house I returned with help, but the murderers had taken fright after they found I had escaped and were not to be found. Another traveler, a merchant, on his way to Charleston to buy goods, relates how he was overtaken by a stranger riding a fine horse, who engaged him in conversation. He felt sure from the first that the man was a robber who was only waiting for a good chance to kill him for his money, so he began, in a natural manner, to tell what bad luck he had experienced and how he hoped to borrow some money when he reached his destination to help him over his troubles. While he was talking, he was trying with one hand to unbuckle the stirrup-leather on the other side of his horse, thinking that with the heavy iron stirrup at its end he could make a good weapon of defence in

case of need. The robber evidently believed him, for after awhile he rode on looking for better game.

The use of this road for driving stock south was continued for fifty years or more, and a small number is still brought here from nearby places to be shipped on the cars.

In those ante-bellum days there was a large brick hotel near the Springs, and the place was then called Warm Springs. The hotel was in old Colonial style, with a lofty porch the entire length of the front, which faced the river. The porch was supported by thirteen large round white columns, which were named for the thirteen original states and were a landmark for travelers. The Springs enjoyed great popularity in those days, since resorts were not as numerous as they are today, and these, and the Springs of Virginia, were the most fashionable and desirable in the South. The best families came every year in their own carriages, with their servants, and stayed all summer. There was dancing every night, and rides and drives in the daytime and amusements of every kind. The table was good, cream and butter from their own cows, chickens in abundance, and beeves and sheep in the pasture to be killed when wanted, embalmed beef and canned food

being still reserved to gladden the digestions of the future. One favorite amusement was to start before daybreak and ride to the top of Rich Mountain to see the sun rise, and then down to the home of Major Broyles, at the foot of the mountain, for breakfast, after which, a guide for the cave was procured, Mose, one of the Major's negroes. The old Major was a veteran of the Mexican war, and a remarkable character in his way; a man of high attainments and much natural eloquence, he drew a crowd around him wherever he went. He married a daughter of Col. Nash, for whom the city of Nashville was named. His home was in Tennessee, the Springs were in North Carolina, the state line running along the top of the divide, Rich being the highest peak. It belonged to the Major, and he named it Rich because it was so fertile. The cave was near the home of his son-in-law, and was a great resort at that time, but during the war was abandoned to robbers and deserters and now is almost forgotten, but will be re-discovered some day, to bring wealth to the one who opens it. It has never been fully explored, only about three miles of it, but is known to contain streams of water, and deep caverns, and one room, the mountaineers say, looks as if it were frozen. In

one place a thirsty explorer left a glass on a stone ledge, perhaps forty or fifty years ago, and now it is embedded in the solid stone by the constant drip of the water. The mountainers discourage any attempt to explore the cave except for a very short distance, the probable reason being one or more illicit stills in its recesses.

It was nearly twenty years after the conclusion of the Civil War before the railroad was completed to the Springs. It brought an increased number of visitors for a few years, more than could be comfortably accommodated, then other resorts were opened, and the number of guests diminished. In 1884 the old brick hotel was burned, and about two years afterwards the Southern Improvement Company bought the place, and built a hotel, no larger than the old one, but more modern, and designed rather as a winter than a summer resort. It was very successful for a time, but frequent changes of management have somewhat diminished the number of visitors. The village of Hot Springs has been growing rapidly in the last few years, and some Northern people have made their homes here, tempted by the fine climate of both summer and winter. The lumbering interests are considerable, the lumber being cut by mills

far up in the mountains, and hauled on wagons to the lumber yards near the track. There is also a large Presbyterian Industrial School here for mountain boys and girls, which has done a good work. Perhaps the most unique house at Hot Springs stands on a commanding plateau across the river from the town, and nearly opposite the hotel, on an elevation of over two hundred feet above the river, and the view from that point is magnificent. The house is of concrete, heavy and solid, and of peculiar architecture, and is the result of the patient labor and courage of two women, being designed by one of them. While men were employed to do the heavy labor, much of the work on this house was performed by the women themselves, and they are justly proud of their work. The grounds are beautiful, and filled with flowers, and are visited every year by hundreds of guests at the Springs; the place is called "The Tempest." The most remarkable fact about this place, however, is that under this plateau is the reservoir of hot water from which the many Springs both in the river bed, and also across the river are fed. Some years since a well was begun near the house, and sunk to the depth of ninety four feet; the project was then abandoned as no water was found; but clouds

of steam poured from it all the time, and rocks taken out of it were warm to the touch. If a drive-well were run to the depth of a hundred and fifty or two hundred feet, there is no question but that a fine stream of quite hot water would be found and in that case this property would be valuable from a hotel man's point of view, for with an abundance of land, a magnificent view, fine climate, beautiful grounds and an artesian well of hot water, what more could the hotel man desire? Railroad men who have already viewed the property say it is the finest hotel site in the country. Two or three good hotels would be the best thing possible for Hot Springs, as competition is always good for trade.

This sketch would not be complete without some slight mention of the mountaineers, the natives of this section. They are probably more purely American than any thing that is left us in these days of immigration and admixture with other nations. Their manners and customs have changed very little since "Good Queen Bess" by the advice of Sir Walter Raleigh sent their forefathers here for penal servitude, and founded a colony of felons. They still retain many of the old English words and forms of speech, and are ready to

boast at any time, as do all good Americans, of the fine families from which they are descended. They are uneducated, and but few can read, but they are very shrewd, and take the greatest pleasure in “doing” the unwary at any time. They will sell you, with an honest face and cheerful heart, a wild turkey or a bucket of dressed squirrels which they assure you were killed that morning, and which you discover, after they have left, are unfit for use; but yet they don’t expect you to think any the less of them when they return again. The Bible is the only book of which they have any knowledge and if they can not read, though they remember all the “Preacher” said about it, and will quote it freely, sometimes with amusing divergence from the text, never thinking of applying its rules and precepts to their own lives, but telling you readily wherein their neighbor errs. They believe the Bible means exactly what it says in words, are not troubled about the higher criticism, and if questioned about the parable of the Wise Virgins, it would be discovered that they believed when the Wise Virgins brought oil in their vessels with their lamps, that they had small tin cans filled with kerosene. One man reproving the “preacher” for some offense said, “If you talk that-a-way,

you are no better than soundin' brass, and tinklin' cymlings" (a small gourd). They are brave, greatly given to hospitality, and very kind-hearted.



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